Nuwanda

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Nuwanda

by mongrelmind

Summary

You are twenty two years old and you empty your bank accounts to go to Europe and be a poet. Or something.

Notes

The two poems quoted are: A Song of Joys, by Walt Whitman and The Flea, by John Donne

You are twenty two years old and already sick of everything. It's been nearly three years since your best friend died and no one has managed to fill the hollowness of your chest, nobody even came close.

You are twenty two years old and they're going to kick you out of university if you don't show up for class, or stop smoking, or start dressing properly. Not signing your exams papers as Nuwanda would probably help as well.

You don't care, not really, it's not like you want to be here.

When the letter comes, politely telling you that you have no place here, it's almost like a miracle, a great weight being lifted from your shoulders.

You are twenty two years old and you empty your bank accounts to go to Europe and be a poet. Or something.

*

It is not enough to have this globe or a certain time,
I will have thousands of globes and all time.

They don't ask you your name with an extra fifty and it's not like you don't have the money so you pay, and they call you Nuwanda, and they give you a set of keys and a small room.

You leave your bags and leave again, go out looking for a drink, smoking and enjoying your newfound freedom. London is gray and cold but you don't feel it and you walk with fragments of poems echoing in your head. It's Whitman this time, bittersweet and victorious, and you whisper the verses to yourself as you explore London, as you drink, as you party. You whisper the poems at the girls you take back at your room, and they laugh and drink it all up, sucking the words out of you with a laugh and a wink.

"My name's Nuwanda and I'm going to be a rock star", you say to them and they laugh, and you laugh, and the world is happy and golden and nobody ever shoots their brains out in their father's study.

*

You are twenty two and living two lives. You are always drunk in one, and happy, in the other you are hangover and, the word makes you wince still, morose.

You are twenty two and London is tiring, too small, too gray, London is not what you wanted it to be so you count your money and get in a train for Paris. You leave one of your bags behind, you keep wearing the same clothes after all, and it only weighs you down. You haven't spoken to your parents for two months. Nobody has called you Charlie during that time either.

*

Paris is.

You find it hard to describe it at first. Your brain keeps thinking in verys and you know that Keating would never approve, but you have no more fancy words, not even for Paris.

It is very loud, and very bright, and very beautiful. You don't bother looking for a hotel, you just walk around until dark and then walk into a bar. There is a large group of people drinking and you sit with them, buying them drinks and laughing until they're putty in your hands.

You were always good at this game.

A girl and her boyfriend take you home, take you to bed, and he asks for your name as she wraps her legs behind your neck and smiles at you. You kiss her and you kiss her and you kiss her and don't answer him until much later, as you're lying in bed smoking something that doesn't taste like tobacco so it's probably drugs, and they're talking about music, and beauty, and love.

"My name's Nuwanda", you tell them with a smile that you know looks irresistible.

They don't believe you but they smile and accept your word, and at that moment you love them, both of them, deeply and painfully.

*

This is Paris for you, sex and wine and all sorts of company. Intellectual discussions with people hidden in a cloud of smoke so thick that when you wake up the next morning on some bed or other you can hardly remember their faces.

They are so different from your old friends, these people that you are drawn to, wilder and harder and…

Lost.

But you were lost too, of course, you had always been lost. You and Knox and Neil and Meeks and Todd. It's been a long time ever since you allowed yourself to think of them, and the wine seems to sour in your mouth when you do. You swallow it down anyway, and you turn to the person next to you, a boy that you think is called Jean Baptiste, and you smile at him, and ask him if he has anything stronger.

"Tell me one of your pretty poems Nuwanda," he says putting his hand on your shoulder, "and I will give you everything."

You smile and find solace in obscenity. As always.

"Mark but this flea, and mark in this,

How little that which thou deniest me is…"

The boy laughs, passes you a bottle and his eyes look so much like Neil's that you feel an ache in what used to be your heart, and you feel your eyes fill with tears.

"I will not deny you anything."

You leave Paris at the same night, sneaking out of his house as he sleeps and you don't pay attention to where you're going.

*

You end up going south, you drink, pass out on the train and wake up somewhere else, bags clutched under your hands, head heavy.

Walking the streets of a city, any city, is different now, lonelier.

You don't know where you are, you don't even know you are, who you are supposed to be.

You board the next train, and the next train, and the next, hoping only that it will get you somewhere else.

*

The cities blur into one another after a few months, and you wake up in Athens which melts into Rome which blurs after a couple of pills and when the world comes to focus again you're in Berlin, and a policeman is poking your ribs.

You open your eyes and then try to make the rest of your body work. You're cold, Berlin is cold, and you're alone, alone, always and forever walking against the stream, exercising your right not to walk, not to think, not to belong. They drag you to the station and speak to you in a rapid cascade of German, you try to understand.

One of the officers seems to ask for your name.

Nuwanda, you say, because you don't remember being called anything else.

He shakes your shoulder, hands you a phone.

You shake your head. There is no one whose number you can remember, there is no one you'd like to call.

They are waiting for you to call your parents, you think, or someone to take care of you, but you won't, not after so long. Your hands move on their own it seems, and you call a number that you remember, spending the time it takes for someone to pick up to remember who it is you've just called.

"Knox Overstreet speaking," Knox says and he sounds just like you remember, and it's too much, it's too much, the phone falls from your hands and you sob.

One of the officers picks up the phone, but Knox has already hung up.

*

They let you go the next day, after going through your things, looking at your papers, probably calling your parents.

They try to make you talk to them but you shake your head, move away from the phone, get a kick to the shin for your trouble.

They let you leave the station and you leave Germany as fast as you can, trying to find a different place to stay, somewhere away from any connection to home.

You look at Berlin through the windows of the train and it looks sad, it looks lost, it looks like a place you could be yourself in, but you've ruined it now and you can never return.

*

Your past catches up with you in Florence, pretty Florence. You

should have known this would happen sometime, this is a small world and you are unlucky.

Todd is taller than you remember, and seems to talk to people more, but his eyes are the same and you recognize each other at once.

He smiles to you, you smile back, suspecting it looks like a grimace.

“Everyone’s looking for you,” is the first thing he says, after a long silence and you nod, not trusting yourself to speak.

He pays for your room, and you smile at him, the same smile that you use on everyone else, but it doesn’t work. He pats your back and makes sure you finish your dinner.

You don’t comment on how he doesn’t order anything to drink, and he doesn’t comment on how you have to fight to keep every scrap of food down.

You throw up in the bathroom, later, your stomach unused to eating so much.

*

He calls your name the following day, and you don’t notice him, at first, unused to answering to it. It’s been nearly a year.

He calls you again and you lift your head, look at him.

He looks worried, he looks upset.

You plan to leave at the first chance you’ll get because even looking at him is painful, reminds you of times gone by and friends long lost.

“I talked to Knox,” he says and you freeze. “He’s taking the next flight here.”

*

You are twenty three now, have been for a few weeks but you still haven’t realized it yet, birthdays are a thing in your past.

You haven’t been home for nearly a year, and you’re hiding in the bathroom of your hotel room, trying to figure out what to do, and making up for not having any wine at dinner with whiskey for breakfast.

You try to think of what your friends would do, in your place.

You don't have a gun, so Neil can't help you.

You don't write poetry, so Todd can't either.

It seems clear, as you're sitting in your tub emptying the mini bar bottle by expensive bottle that your friends are all useless, or dead, or both. You laugh, and it sounds manic, and desperate, even to you.

Looking at the mirror you almost don't recognize yourself. You're thinner, paler, the bags under your eyes dark and heavy, and there's a small scar on your chin from a fight somewhere. Marseilles, maybe, or Lyon. You're quite sure it was France.

You are Nuwanda, who once had a different name, and you left your house a year ago to come to Europe and be a rock star, or a poet, or something equally glamorous and exciting. You are Nuwanda and you can't remember the last time you were sober, or how long it will be until your hands shake and you go out looking for the people that can give you what you need. You are Nuwanda and your friends are coming for you, with their laughter and their happy lives and their poetry. You try to remember something of what Keating taught you, anything, but the words were burnt out of your head a long time ago.

There is a knock on your door. Knox's voice, again, without the distance of a telephone life this time.

He knocks again. You consider getting up and letting him in but you don't trust yourself not to slip and break your head on the sink. You try to answer but it's difficult, and the words don't come.

Todd says something, quietly, and then there's a heavy thud on the door, followed by another, and then it's open, broken, and they're there, looking at you.

"Charlie you idiot," Knox says, worried so worried, and he crouches down next to you, pulling you into a hug that hurts and doesn't exactly comfort you.

*

Your name is Charlie Dalton, you are twenty three years old, and someday you will go home, and get a job, and live a normal life.

Your name is Charlie Dalton and you know that this is your future,

your bleak, sad future, even though your friends tell you different.

You are Charlie Dalton and the future is not here yet, the sun is out and you're lying in bed with a boy that you must have loved for a long time, and he's pulling you out of the gutter, inch by inch, word by word.

He's whispering a poem into your ear, as you wake up, and you hear in his voice that he means it, like you never managed to do.

You open your eyes and the bright new day is a song of joy.

You try not to ask yourself how long it will last.

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